

We Are What We Do

Many years ago in my philosophy class at the College of Wooster, I learned the Latin phrase “Cogito ergo sum.” This is how René Descartes (1596-1650), the famous French mathematician and philosopher, verified human existence. Translated it means “I think, therefore I am.”

Today, I see more relevance in the Latin phrase “Facio ergo sum,” which means “I do, therefore I am.” For me, this phrase is more suitable because I’ve come to realize how much my behaviors define who I think I am. In other words, I see myself doing certain things and then I use that behavior to define the kind of person I am at that moment. Thus, our behavior not only verifies our existence, it qualifies the nature of our reality. It sometimes defines a personal label we attempt to live up to through follow-up behavior. And, of course, that label and concomitant behavior can be good or bad, socially acceptable or unacceptable, safe or at-risk.

Inferring Self from Behavior

The notion that we define who we are from our behaviors is founded in the teaching and research of B. F. Skinner and the follow-up scholarship of Daryl J. Bem – an eminent professor of psychology at Stanford University. Dr. Bem developed a comprehensive theory of self-perception on the basic premise that, “Individuals come to ‘know’ their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs” (from Bem’s 1972 book chapter entitled *Self-Perception Theory*).

When we want to learn what another person is thinking or feeling, we look to see how that person acts in a particular environmental context. Similarly, according to

Bem's self-perception theory, when we want to know how we feel, we look at our own behavior and the circumstances surrounding it. This is exemplified by a person eating an excessive amount of food and then stating, "I must have been hungrier than I thought." Or, how about the individual who performs below par and concludes, "I'm not as good at this as I thought I was." Then there's the worker who goes out of her way to help another person and thinks, "I must care more than I thought I did." These are obvious cases of behavior influencing thought processes.

Supportive Research

Classic research by Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer in 1962 supports the claim that self-perception is determined in part by overt behavior. Experimental subjects were given injections of epinephrine or adrenaline, which made them feel physically aroused. Then these subjects waited individually with one other person who presumably had received the same injection. Moments later the experimenter returned and asked the two individuals to complete a questionnaire about their feelings.

What emotion did these subjects experience? The physiological arousal was the same for every subject, but some reported extreme anger while others said they were very happy. What made the difference? The subject's own behavior and that of the other person in the waiting room, who was actually a research assistant, determined whether the subject felt extreme anger or joy.

During the waiting period, the research assistant, posing as another subject, acted in one of two ways. In the Euphoric condition, he threw paper airplanes, shot crumpled balls of paper into a wastebasket, and twirled in a hula hoop. He encouraged the subject to join in the fun, and most did.

In the Anger condition, both individuals were asked to complete a questionnaire while waiting for the experimenter to return. The questions were intimate and quite inappropriate, especially the question “With how many men has your mother had extramarital affairs – four and under, five to nine, or ten and over?” When the research assistant read this question he ripped up his survey form in a fit of rage.

Perhaps the finding that behavior influenced the emotional state in the Schachter and Singer study seems obvious, or just common sense. But realize what the results mean. The participant’s emotional reaction was determined by the behavior they observed from themselves and another person. After being physically aroused, they felt joy or anger depending on external circumstances and accompanying behavior.

This is only one example of numerous experiments that have demonstrated the crucial role of external events and behaviors on perception of personal emotions, attitudes, and moods. For example, in one series of studies, subjects’ emotions were manipulated by giving them false auditory feedback about their heartbeat. When they presumably heard their heart beating faster they felt more sexually aroused or fearful, depending on other external events. Thus, it’s possible to change self-perception by altering external conditions. In other words, we can act ourselves (or others) into thinking or feeling a certain way.

Acting Ourselves Into Thinking

I often use this phrase to explain the significance of behavior-based safety. I don’t mean to imply that behavior always precedes and influences thinking. Personal experience clearly refutes such a premise. We often think ourselves into doing things. At least it certainly seems that way. In fact, it’s commonly believed that our personal

motivation comes from within us, implying that we think ourselves into acting in certain ways.

But suppose you wanted to motivate someone else to do something. How would you do it? Well, even if you believe people can only truly motivate themselves (from within), you can at least establish an external condition or environmental context that facilitates intrapersonal motivation. What does this mean? It means you can do things to increase the probability people will do what you want. Attempts to make this happen are considered interventions, and they can vary from developing an external accountability system or incentive program to initiating opportunities for personal choice, ownership, or constructive interpersonal conversation.

My point is that the most efficient way to motivate certain action in others is to create an environmental context or behavior-consequence contingency that facilitates the occurrence of desired performance. In other words, you set the occasion for people to act themselves into new ways of thinking. Their new behavior can influence a new way of perceiving themselves. This can lead to a new personal label and then to more behavior consistent with that label. "I'm wearing my safety glasses, so I'm a safe worker and should also use all other personal protective equipment."

Thus, personal change can be viewed as a continuous spiral of behavior causing thinking, thinking inducing more behavior, and then this additional behavior influencing more thinking consistent with the behavior, and so on. It doesn't matter which came first – certain behavior or certain thinking. What matters is that we can affect beneficial change in others by focusing on their behavior. Then, when people see themselves doing what you want, they *might* change how they view themselves. They *might* act

themselves into thinking differently, and thus motivate themselves to sustain the new behavior.

I emphasized “might” in the prior two sentences, because some interventions to change behavior do not facilitate an attendant change in thinking. My *ISHN* articles for the next two months will explain this point further, and offer some research-based principles for increasing the likelihood that interventions to alter behavior will also influence thinking consistent with that behavior change. For now, I only want you to consider that our actions help define who we think we are. If I have convinced you this is true, or better if you have convinced yourself of the reality of this statement, then you see the power in behavior -- in personal performance.

In Conclusion

This article underscored a basic principle of behavior-based safety: Our behavior defines our self-perception, which in turn motivates more behavior consistent with this internal dialogue. This principle explains the positive transformation observed in many line employees who dedicate substantial time and effort applying the effective tools of behavior-based safety.

But, not all behavior change leads to consistent changes in thinking and self-perception. We know intuitively that concepts like “personal control,” “empowerment,” and “ownership” determine whether our behavior influences supportive thinking, attitude, and self-perception. Hold on to this thought. My *ISHN* contribution next month will clarify this critical point, and explain what we can do about it.

For now, appreciate the potential of your own behavior in defining who you think you are. This is ample justification for starting off strong in performing those New Year’s

resolutions. A potent behavioral effort can initiate a self-motivating spiral of behavior feeding thinking, thinking motivating more behavior, and so on. Then, accomplishing your New Year's resolutions will define the better person you have become.

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